REFLECTIONS

Mary Catherine "Mollie" Schultz Dear Deakins, c. 1878–1880 (tentative identification)
Jeffrey Hunt

This carefully composed studio portrait is almost certainly Mary Catherine "Mollie" Schultz—or expansively, Mary Schultz Dear Deakins. She was the widow of Confederate soldier Robert Newton Dear and later the wife of James Washington Deakins. Together, they made the long journey west with her two young sons, eventually settling in Oakland, Oregon. Mary was my great great grandmother.

Though the card is unmarked, several clues strongly support the identification. The style of dress, the photographic quality, and especially the painted backdrop all point to San Francisco around 1878–1880. High Victorian. In the background, a painted representation of Angel Island is visible—the historic point of entry for Chinese immigrants on the West Coast. To the left, Mount Tamalpais rises faintly in the distance, and the hills near Potrero frame the imaginary bay. This is unmistakably San Francisco Bay, rendered by hand in what was surely a popular studio backdrop of the time.

We know Mary was in San Francisco during this period, along with her sons. My guess is that upon arrival, she did what many families did in that era: dressed in her best and visited a photographer. She sits calmly, gloved, umbrella in hand, with her hat placed gently in her lap. Her posture is formal but not severe, and there's a quiet strength and joyful composure in her expression.

If this is indeed Mary, she would have been in her mid-to-late thirties at the time of the photo. Her sons, Allen and Robert, would have been about 15 and 13. It's easy to imagine her arranging for a portrait as they began to establish a new life in the West.

Although the image lacks a studio mark, I'm fairly certain that with a little sleuthing—comparing studio backdrops from the era—it would be possible to identify the specific photographer. This painted San Francisco scene was likely reused in other portraits, and should appear again in the output of a known Bay Area photo studio.

This photograph, like many others in the Dear Hunt Archive, comes from what we call the "Vail Dear Steel Box Collection"—a plain, thin-walled metal filing cabinet that sat for decades in the attic above my grandparents' garage in Camas, Washington.